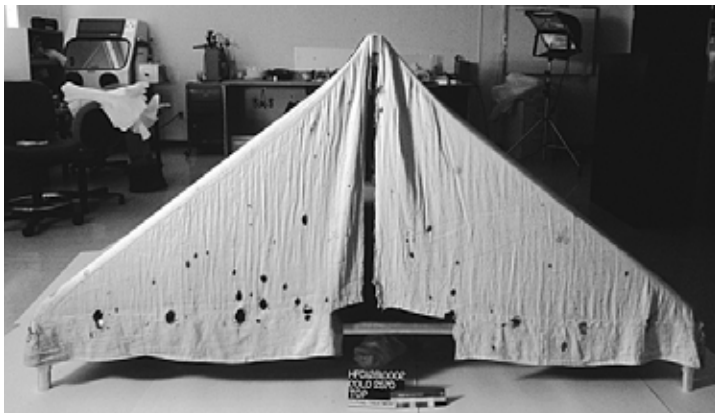


George Washington's Field Tents

The Challenge of Preserving and Interpreting a National Treasure in the 21st Century

In the late autumn of 1775, Colonel Joseph Reed, Military Secretary and Adjutant General to General George Washington, placed an order with Plunket Fleeson of Philadelphia for the construction of tents and camp equipage. The order included a large dining tent, another large tent with an inner chamber, a large baggage tent, 18 walnut campstools, and three walnut camp tables. Delivered in May 1776, the tents were used in the field by Washington throughout the American Revolution. In 1781, the tents were set up as the headquarters for the Siege of Yorktown. It was within these walls of linen and wool that Washington met with such men as the Comte de Rochambeau, Alexander Hamilton, and the Marquis de Lafayette to plan the siege against General Lord Charles Cornwallis that led to his surrender. The American victory at Yorktown, the last major battle of the American Revolution, secured independence for the United States and significantly changed the course of world history. Today, portions of the tents are among the most significant objects owned by Colonial National Historical Park, which administers and interprets Yorktown Battlefield. The Yorktown collection contains the inner chamber to the sleeping marquee or office tent liner, the ceiling liner to the dining marquee, a storage bag, and several tent poles.

The roof section of the sleeping or office tent during conservation treatment at the Harpers Ferry Center textile conservation lab.



After the Revolution, the tents returned to Mount Vernon with Washington. Upon Washington's death in 1799, the tents became the property of Martha Custis Washington. Upon her death, her grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, purchased the tents at the estate auction and kept them at his home, Arlington House. During his ownership, Custis used the tents for special occasions. The most widely reported use of the tents was during the Marquis de Lafayette's visit to the United States in 1824. The tents accompanied him throughout his tour including a visit to Yorktown on October 19, the anniversary of the surrender. Custis made no mention of the tents in his will when he died in 1857, so they automatically passed to his only child, Mary Custis Lee. When her husband, Robert E. Lee, accepted the position as Commander of the Virginia Confederate forces, Mary Lee was forced to leave Arlington and left the tents behind. The Union Army occupied Arlington in 1861, and the tents and other Washington relics were seized and moved to the Patent Office of the Department of the Interior for safekeeping. In 1883, they were moved to the Smithsonian Institution. In 1901, President McKinley returned the Washington collection to the Lee family. The large tent, known as the sleeping marquee, was sold to Reverend Dr. Burk, founder of the Valley Forge Historical Society in 1909. Today, it is exhibited at Valley Forge National Historical Park. In 1955, the National Park Service purchased its tents for the new Yorktown Visitor Center which opened in 1957. The dining marquee is exhibited at the Smithsonian.

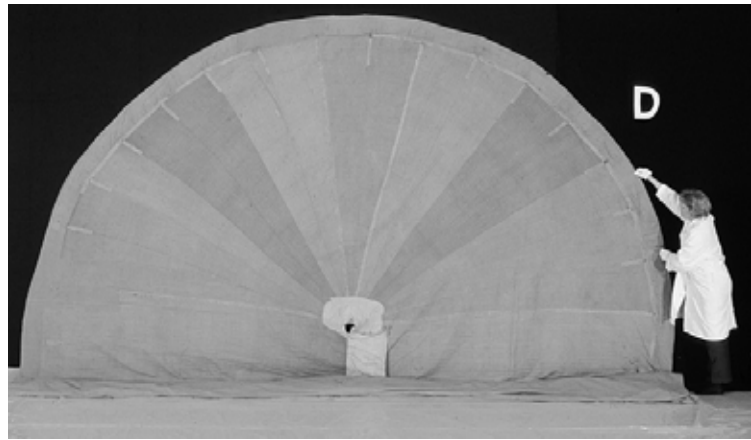
Although Yorktown's tents were placed on exhibit in 1957, the first conservation work on these important textiles did not take place until 1976. The then state-of-the-art conservation included wet cleaning and repair with the addition of support backings using modern textile. The tents were returned to a new exhibit at

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation textile conservator Loreen Finkelstein with a portion of the wool lining of the dining tent before the condition assessment.

Yorktown in time for the 1981 bicentennial of the Siege of Yorktown. The inner chamber was displayed on a frame and the ceiling liner to the dining tent was folded in an open display stand. It was not until 1982 that a climate control system was installed in the new exhibit case. Unfortunately, the environmental control system did not maintain a stable environment resulting in damaging fluctuations in humidity and temperature. Also, the exhibit case was too small for easy and safe access by curatorial staff, and the frames on which the tents were exhibited hampered regular inspection and care of the tents.

In 1997, with the advice and assistance from the Division of Conservation at the National Park Service's Harpers Ferry Center, the tents were removed from exhibit, and a plan for long-term preservation was implemented. Using the park's Fee Demonstration Program funds, the inner chamber was taken to the NPS Conservation Lab for evaluation and preservation by textile conservator Jane Merritt. Photographic documentation, a Mylar template documenting the tent's current condition, and research by Jane, her staff, and military historian Bill Brown have raised new questions about the appearance and construction of the inner chamber. Bill Brown's research has provided much of the historical background on the tents, which is included in this article.

In 1999, using funds from the Museum Collection Preservation and Protection (MCP) program and under an existing cooperative agreement with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF), the park contracted with the CWF textile conservation laboratory to prepare a condition assessment and preservation plan for the wool and linen ceiling liner to the dining tent. As with the inner chamber, photographic documentation and a Mylar template recording its condition have provided information about the appearance, construction, and current condition of the artifact. Microscopic analysis of the fibers, dyes, stains, and surface soil have revealed valuable new information about the previous appearance, construction, use, previous treatment, and condition of the fabric. For example, evidence reveals that the wool fibers had been green rather than the mustard color as seen today, and human hairs, tea,



paint, and blood remain on the surface of the cloth.

Choosing to work with the textile conservation facility at Colonial Williamsburg has been a rewarding experience for several reasons. First, they are only a half-hour away, which allows the park staff the ability to visit the project for study sessions and to keep abreast of the latest progress and discoveries. Secondly, the expertise and contacts of the CWF staff including those in the historic area, have led to a treasure trove of information related to the project, which will be extremely beneficial in the conservation treatment and interpretation of this unique artifact.

In 1999, the remainder of the work to preserve and interpret the inner chamber and ceiling liner was selected for funding by the Save America's Treasures Program. This work includes the preservation of the ceiling liner, research on how the tents historically would have fit together, and the actual construction of a new exhibit case and interpretive panels. The park is working with a local non-profit group, the Yorktown Foundation, to raise the matching funds required by this program. The actual design and preparation of specifications for the exhibit case will be funded under the MCP program.

In late January, park staff and CWF staff met with conservators and curators at the Smithsonian to discuss the history of the conservation and construction of the dining marquee and, specifically, to look at how the ceiling liner may have been attached to the dining marquee. Since 1991, the park and the Smithsonian have discussed common concerns on the conservation and interpretation of the tents, but no joint plan of action has resulted. However, everyone agrees that the final plans for the exhibit and treatment of the tents need to be based on input from a team of experts. Continued exhibition of the

tents may hasten their deterioration. Replacing the tents with reproductions will deprive the American public of an experience to see the most significant objects of the American Revolution. Therefore, to further explore all options, the park will hold a charette, or group discussion, with textile conservators, curators, interpreters, engineers, lighting specialists, and others to generate ideas and recommendations.

Several ideas for long-term care and exhibition are being considered. One idea is to reproduce the dining marquee to serve as protection for the original liner placed underneath it. Another display approach might be to show the information revealed during the conservation surveys. In all cases, state of the art lighting will be a large part of the exhibit process, providing the public with sufficient light for viewing the objects, while keeping the light levels within museum standards.

Although a specific exhibit approach is undecided, the main object of the park is to place the tents back on exhibit under the best conditions and to provide the public with a better appreciation of the objects and the need to preserve them. The year 2006 is the 225th anniversary of the Siege of Yorktown. The return of these tents to the public eye with state-of-the-art conservation technology will enhance the significance of the event and the National Park Service's role in the preservation field.

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Loreen Finkelstein is textile conservator at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Photos courtesy National Park Service, Colonial National Historical Park.

National Register of Historic Places Web Site News

The National Register of Historic Places is unveiling a new design for its web site, at <www.cr.nps.gov/nr>, with improved organization and navigation. The number of visitors to the web site has grown exponentially, and new features are added almost monthly. The increased number of visitors is due, in part, to the many new lesson plans and travel itineraries that have been added. Thirty-three Teaching With Historic Places classroom-ready lesson plans have been added to the web site thus far, and more than 25 other lessons are planned for addition this year. Past titles include *When Rice was King* (investigating early rice plantations in South Carolina), *The Battle of Bunker Hill: Now We Are At War*, and *Clara Barton's House: Home of the American Red Cross*. Among the lesson plans to be added in the near future are *From Canterbury to Little Rock: The Struggle for Educational Equality for African Americans* and *The Washington Monument: Tribute in Stone*.

Historic places in Kingston, New York, Central Vermont, and Charleston, South Carolina, were highlighted as the first projects in an ongoing series of community-based

travel itineraries. The Register is creating these travel itineraries in partnership with local groups interested in developing heritage tourism for their community, and with assistance from the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers and the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions. In addition, a Washington, DC, travel itinerary featuring nearly 100 sites was launched in October in connection with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Preservation Conference, held in Washington. These travel itineraries joined the eight earlier travel itineraries, which focused on large cities or broad themes. *Journey Through Hallowed Ground: Route 15 Through the Virginia Piedmont* is the latest travel itinerary launched this spring, which focuses on sites located along this historic route that tell the history of this colorful region. Watch for new lesson plans, travel itineraries, and periodic celebratory features as they are unveiled throughout the year at the homepage of the National Register web site <www.cr.nps.gov/nr>.